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# Community Transportation

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## ***Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation***

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The following article was reprinted from the Fall 2003 edition of **Community Transportation Magazine**, which is a publication of the *Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA)*.

**CTAA** is a national, professional membership association of organizations and individuals committed to removing barriers to isolation and to improving mobility for all people. It is based in Washington, D.C.

**CTAA** conducts research, provides technical assistance, offers educational programs and serves as an advocate in order to make coordinated community transportation available, affordable and accessible.

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## *Leveraging the Wisdom of Community*

By Beth Wilson

# *get SMART*

**I**t was a long, five-hour drive, begun in the early dawn hours. A pilgrimage of sorts. In search of direction. A management team from the Detroit metropolitan area's Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) headed toward the Chicago suburbs for a visit they hoped would offer insight. It was the fall of 1994 and SMART's fate hung in the balance. The tri-county system that had evolved moving suburban workers to downtown Detroit's job market no longer matched the needs of the communities it served. Dwindling ridership and farebox return compounded mounting debt. The region needed a new model of mobility.

A \$20 million deficit made it a budget excursion. Two tanks of gas and no hotel. The team would wrap up their one-day visit to Pace with a long return drive that night. Mission accomplished?

"Chicago is a lot different than Detroit," says SMART General Manager Dan Dirks, explaining why they returned without a prototype. "We didn't copy anything that Pace was doing, but we did take their advice. They said, 'Try anything!'"

Sage counsel that SMART adopted as its chief operating principle. Instead of a template for transit, SMART adopted a philosophy for mobility — partnership became its *modus operandi*, community its *raison d'être*. It would launch SMART's revolution in southeast Michigan.



## SEARCHING FOR UNIVERSAL ACCESS



If you want to reach Dan Dirks, better try his cell phone. He's not at his desk. He's somewhere out in the community — a reality that depicts today's SMART organism. It is not a static transit system waiting for community residents to tap into it; it is itself a dynamic network tapped into dozens of area communities. The story of SMART is told through the dozens of stories of local mobility. It is a tale of rebirth.

In the boom years after World War II, public investment in freeways and sewer and water systems fueled the growth of suburbs across the nation. Accordingly, public transit focused on connecting suburban residents with city-center jobs. The industrial restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s, however, transformed downtown Detroit. The post-war prosperity fueled by the auto industry and its attendant economic boom gave way to foreign competition, job and income loss in the city and the shift of employment to the suburbs. The surrounding tri-county area gained 250,000 new jobs during the 1980s, while the inner city lost 100,000. SMART's ridership steadily declined.

"We were trying to serve a need that had disappeared," explains Ron Ristau, Director of Service Development. "We were going out of business."

In 1989, a Southeast Michigan Council of Governments' report ranked Michigan 19th out of the 20 largest urban areas in the United States in local financial support for its public transportation system. As the new decade began, SMART faced rising operating costs, declining revenues, aging infrastructure and uncertain local support.

It was time to try anything.

*Eschewing models and precedents, mobility in southeast Michigan is being crafted by diverse communities and their dynamic regional partner. Coordinating local ingenuity with established expertise, SMART is enabling intelligent connections.*

### The Millage and the Makeover

SMART set out to gain approval for a transit-dedicated property tax from the voters in its service area. Simply subsidizing a system that had become

(From left) Passengers Naomi, Aida and Lorraine don't see all the coordinated efforts that make their rides possible. They see a connection to their community.





defined by debt and mismatched service was unlikely to appeal to area residents. Instead, SMART proposed that communities invest in themselves. In a new mobility scenario, a 1/3 mil property tax would provide SMART with \$18 million annually for three years — but SMART would return a portion to municipalities to finance locally devised mobility service. Communities could take this rebate — a formula-based Community Credit — and use it to address transit needs specific to their residents. Home-grown mobility options and local control to focus on local need had widespread appeal. Tri-county voters approved the millage, and a new era of transit coordination in southeast Michigan began.

"It was a cataclysmic event that changed the world," says Ristau. "We stopped being focused primarily on Detroit. It allowed us to do new things."

Things like the Community Partnership Program. Public support and a crucial funding stream enabled the agency to come out from under debt and refocus. SMART became a three-pronged regional mobility instrument, restructuring fixed-route and paratransit service in line with current residential and business development, and collaborating with local municipalities and providers to develop and enhance community-designed, community-based systems to fill in mobility gaps.

The SMART renaissance continues to be fueled by coordinated assessment, planning and service. In addition to its fixed-route "line-haul" service, SMART directly operates a 90-vehicle Connector service, designed to best meet existing traffic patterns in the region with curb-to-curb advanced reservation rides, same-day dial-a-ride service in specific municipal areas, flexible route service that offers additional connections to work and retail areas, and Job Express shuttles to businesses. While senior and disabled shopping and medical trips define the majority of Connector's service, employment-site access and city-to-city connections are growing in demand.

Community Transit service does not duplicate but rather complements SMART operations. As a funding redistribution program, Community Partnership enables SMART to collect an annual millage from participating communities in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties, support its operations in those communities, and credit dollars back to those same communities according to a state funding formula based on population and availability of SMART fixed-route service. New partnerships and expanded mobility options have grown around not only new dollars but Community Credit Coordination Plans identifying unmet need and existing transportation providers and programs, and exploring ways to benefit from SMART services, including scheduling software, vehicle maintenance, joint vehicle purchasing, data collection and training. SMART, in turn, uses the Coordination Plans in their own planning efforts, developing and adjust-

ing SMART's services to complement a community's local service.

Today, nearly 80 communities in three counties coordinate mobility in partnership with SMART. The Authority's three ombudspersons cover all three counties, providing a conduit to SMART's expertise, guidance and services, and communicating needs, concerns and ideas back to SMART. A team of analysts is available to survey an area — identifying road work, business closings, new employers, transfer points that can blur jurisdictional lines — collect data, introduce scheduling software and help communities define the parameters of service. In dynamic coordination, the partners have built a regional mobility network that leverages home-team advantage.

## Architects and Engineers

Jeff White knew firsthand the unmet mobility need in northern Macomb County. A paramedic for the past 23 years, he understood the importance of connections and healthcare access. In his work with the Richmond-Lenox Township Emergency Medical Service, he noted the volume of calls requesting rides to doctors' offices, diagnostic appointments and pharmacies.

"As an EMS, we had no way to provide that kind of service," says White, chief of Emergency Medical Services. "The only way to do it was to have people pay. And the people we were talking to didn't have the money. These were seniors and disabled residents, many living on fixed incomes, some of them choosing between macaroni and cheese and prescription medication!"

SMART's fixed-route service at that time didn't fit the rural nature of the northern municipalities. Getting to bus stops was alone a significant challenge.

"In the country, if people could get five miles to K-MART, they could get 20 miles to the doctor's office in Mount Clemens. They already had someone to drive them," explains White. "We aimed to serve those residents requiring not just curb-to-curb service, but livingroom to livingroom service."

The Community Partnership Program presented an opportunity. White sat down with SMART representatives and explained his idea.

"I said, 'I think we can do this, but we need vehicles and operating overhead.' SMART said, 'We want you to do this. What can we do to make this work?'"

White went to the eight different municipalities in the 350-square-mile service area and sold the partnership.

"People had seen empty vehicles running around. The reaction was, 'Good. We can finally use some of this money, and see people in our community that benefit.'"

People like James and William, both on the bus after dialysis. Their families attend the same church in New Haven, where Williams's wife learned about the

services from James' wife.

"This is the best thing for those of us who don't drive," says William. "You might get someone you know to pick you up, but you might not."

Joseph, a resident in a care facility in Richmond, is accompanied by his aide Gail. The facility has its own van, she explains, but no staff available to drive. The Richmond-Lenox system offers reliability and flexibility. And community. It's rare, she says, to be on the bus and not see someone she knows on board.

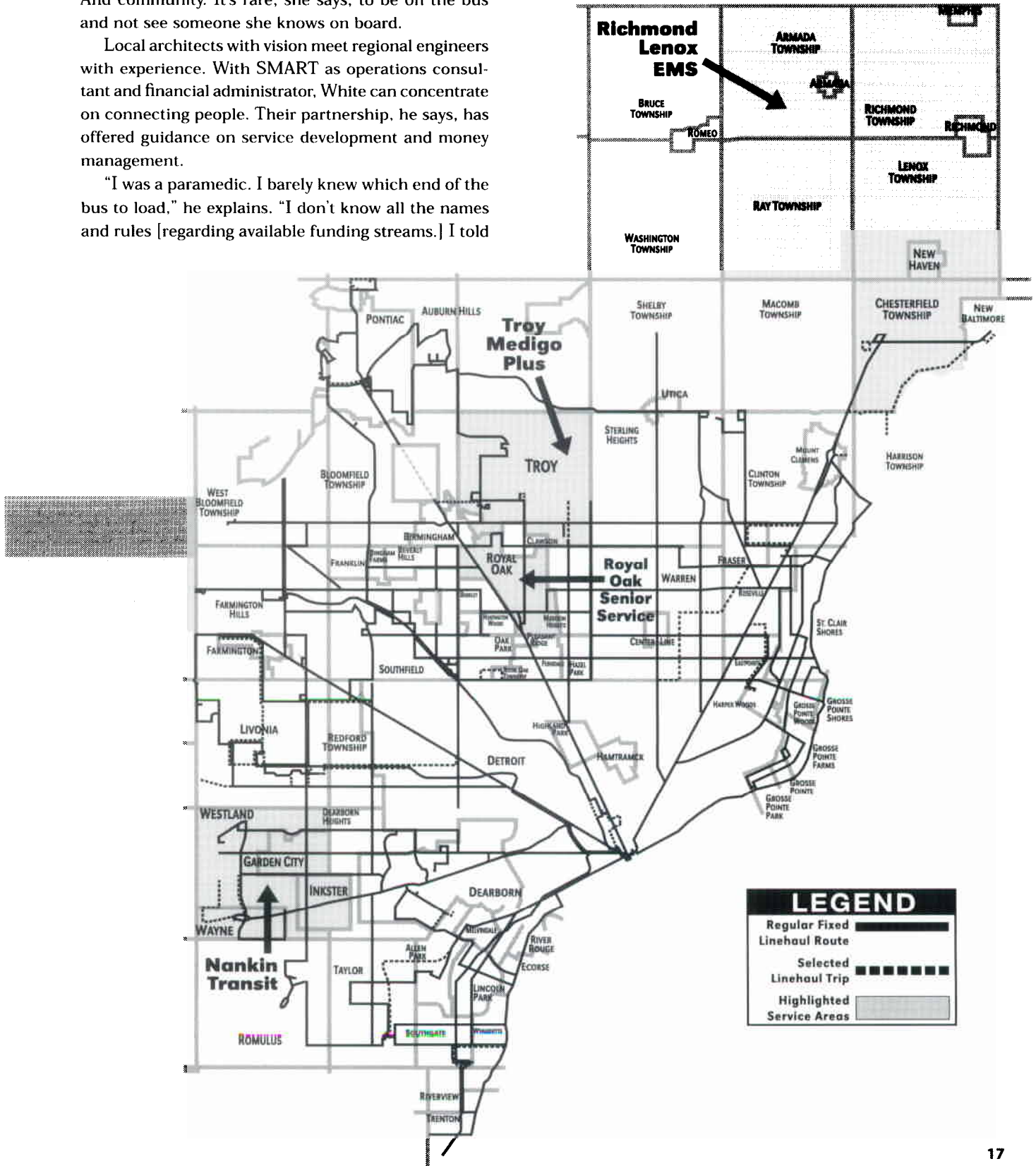
Local architects with vision meet regional engineers with experience. With SMART as operations consultant and financial administrator, White can concentrate on connecting people. Their partnership, he says, has offered guidance on service development and money management.

"I was a paramedic. I barely knew which end of the bus to load," he explains. "I don't know all the names and rules [regarding available funding streams.] I told

them, 'I need green money to make this work.' And SMART sends me a check."

While White attends county coordination meetings as often as possible, he emphasizes the heavy schedules most providers are juggling.

"So many operators of community transit are doing more than one job — they're running a senior center;



County Ombudspersons Fred Barbret and Donna Sykes act as coordination conduits between local communities and SMART.



they're running a Parks and Rec department," he explains. "That's the beauty of having the Fred Barbrets of the world. He comes to us!"

Working with Fred Barbret, SMART's ombudsperson for Macomb County, White is kept informed of available funds, SMART services and possibilities. Together they craft a transit plan each year — outlining preventative maintenance, capital and operating needs, and the best use of dollars to get the job done.

"We're all on a first-name basis. There's a high level of respect and commitment," says Barbret, who knows White's telephone number by heart. "The old SMART was an outmoded, inefficient business. We've turned bureaucracy into personal relationships."

Access to more funding enabled the system to hire a scheduler 20 months ago. With a professional on board to analyze runs, track availability and communicate with area physicians, ridership doubled. White expects greater volume as the population in his service area continues to grow. The 2000 Census revealed more than a 100 percent increase since 1990. The level of emergency run volume, however, has leveled off, and White attributes that to the paratransit service and its critical partnership with SMART.

"We often say that when people call the first time, they need to get to the doctor's. When they call the second time, they're having a heart attack," says White, underscoring the importance of healthcare access. "If we can make sure people can get to dialysis, to doctor appointments, to the pharmacy, we can prevent an emergency from happening."

### Wired for Service

"Some people at certain points in their life know what they're supposed to be doing. I've known what I was supposed to do since I was a young girl," says Jo Rhoads, founder of Troy Medigo and current vice president of the Board of Directors for what has become Troy Medigo Plus.

Rhoads' dedication to seniors, her life's work, led to an awareness of mobility needs in her community. She amassed some 100 volunteers from her church to connect the community's seniors with their medical care. But as volunteers were lost, she contemplated a more structured and permanent transit system for Troy. The City Council supported her idea, dedicating \$16,000 from the city coffers, and numerous residents chipped in dollars from their own pockets. A donated van from the area non-profit Independence for Life put her strategy on the road.

"I think it's the most terrific thing," says passenger Lorraine as she's picked up after her appointment at Beaumont Hospital. "It's difficult for someone like me. I'm by myself. I drive still, but it's getting more difficult."



I renew my license next year. I think they may say, 'You can't drive anymore.' I'd be lost without this."

Since learning about the service three years ago while in the hospital with an injured arm, she's become a regular.

"They told me I could take it to rehabilitation. Then I found out they'll take you shopping and to the community center!"

Driver Val D'Souza picks up Stanley, a dialysis patient, at the outpatient facility near the hospital. Hailing from Poland and speaking little English, Stanley has his son-in-law communicate his experience with Medigo.

"It's a lifesaver. They pick him up. They bring him home," he says. "Stanley used to drive. Then he got in an accident. If it wasn't for Medigo, someone would have to quit their job to get him to treatment three times a week."

When Medigo began, the service provided rides to medical appointments only, with cancer and chemotherapy patients the priority. In the last several years, the system has been able to branch out — taking seniors grocery shopping, to the salon, and connecting disabled residents to school and work. Hence, Medigo Plus. Rhoads credits the system's partnership with SMART for Medigo's wider reach. Access to ideas, assistance, a channel for vehicles, maintenance and gas, and especially new technology, she says, have produced a structure that can accommodate a wider variety of need.

Walk into the computer room at SMART's Oakland County office and the possibilities are evident. With an unlimited license for scheduling software, SMART's community partners — even the smallest systems — can tap into the latest technology. Troy Medigo Plus, with an office staff of two, books their trips directly on the SMART server via the Internet.

SMART's remote scheduling system, explains Dirks, grew out of provider discussions in the quarterly County Coordinating Committee meetings. Participants — including public and private providers, Area Agencies on Aging, agencies serving disabled clients, local ARCs, intermediate schools, the Family Independence Agency, local government officials, medical facilities and regional planning organizations — shared their experience and concerns.

"If one community had a problem, you knew it was a problem for everyone," says Dirks. "The meetings developed a common theme — 'Wouldn't it be great if we could all get together?!'"

The central real-time demand-response system — viewed by Dirks and Ristau as

the hallmark of coordination — has enormous possibilities. Community-based transit providers potentially can combine and coordinate with not only the SMART system but with all regional providers. Including Medigo, eight systems are now plugged in. SMART's aim is to have every provider in the tri-county area on the same real-time page.

More efficient scheduling over the past two years has helped stretch a limited budget, and has enabled Troy Medigo Plus to increase ridership from 24 to 40 passengers a day. With all rides logged in a database, information on customers and destinations is accessible through a few keystrokes, and proves valuable in seeking support from local hospitals and businesses. Beaumont Hospital alone contributes \$15,000 each year. More support enables more connections.

More exposure couldn't hurt. SMART is helping communities take advantage of the immediacy and reach of the Internet. Through its new website, community residents can explore all the mobility options available in their area and learn how to access them. The "browse by community" feature, explains Ristau, will eventually include links to communities' own websites.

It's Adam's first day of school. As a student teacher of U.S. history in Clawson, Adam will be taking Troy Medigo to and from work each day. He already knows driver Val, since he's been using the service to attend



Exemplifying the 'plus' in Troy Medigo Plus, Adam commutes to work using the accessible system.



Oakland University for the past four years.

Aida knows Val, too. In fact, she knows all the Medigo drivers by name. She stopped driving four years ago, and first took the service to medical appointments. She's been taking the bus to her job at Sears for two years now.

When the millage idea was first floated, Rhoads was familiar with SMART, and knew a complimentary partnership could be beneficial to her community. Yet, she was apprehensive.

"We're very hands-on, very personalized. And that's the way we want it. I was afraid we might lose the individuality we're known for," says Rhoads of her uncertainty. "But that hasn't happened. We've been given carte blanche. We still have local control over what we feel we need to do for our community."

### Nankin's Nickels

Marie is waiting in her wheelchair outside her home at Wayne Towers. She submitted her application for an apartment in the senior citizens complex more than a year before securing a space. She was willing to wait.

"I chose Wayne Towers because they have a bus here," stresses Marie.

She boards Nankin Transit on Tuesdays and Fridays for shopping excursions, on various days for doctor's appointments and always on Wednesdays for a visit to the hair salon, where her niece styles her hair just the way she likes it. She gets a good deal there, and the bus ride is affordable to boot.

"That's so important to seniors on fixed incomes," says Nankin Transit Commission Executive Director Richard Fernandez. "If you look at our actual cost per rider versus what we charge, it's a heck of a deal."

Finding a good deal is valuable not only to passengers but to the system running the buses.

"In our work, we don't count dollars. We count nickels," says Fernandez, emphasizing community transit's budget constraints.

With an interlocal agreement and a couple of vans, Nankin Transit began responding to area mobility needs nearly three decades ago. When Fernandez came on board 10 years ago, federal funding was precarious with insufficient local dollars. The millage, he says, was crucial to the community-based system's survival.

"We had no certified funding coming to us from our communities," explains Fernandez. "SMART changed that."

Today, with 12 buses on the streets of Westland, Garden City, Inkster and Wayne, the system provides nearly 400 rides a day. SMART's Community Credits contribute nearly a third of Nankin's total budget.

"For me to have the staff here in our office well-versed in applying for grants, maintaining these funds, doing all the paperwork, I'd need two to three extra people," points out Fernandez. "SMART already has the professionals we need."

Fernandez spent many working years in the business world before leaving it to become a city commissioner. While the public position "is where I cut my teeth on transit," it's the marketing skills he honed in the private sector that make him a good salesman. With a large number of medical clinics in the area, Fernandez saw an opportunity to make a deal.

"How much does it cost you to keep a patient? I'd ask these doctors," recalls Fernandez. "Is it worth \$2.00 to you?"

Fernandez helped the medical professionals make the connection between the care they offer and the ride Nankin offers. Understanding the value, many now purchase bus passes for their patients. An employee at Garden City Hospital even coordinates the rides with Nankin's dispatcher. A heck of a deal.

A partnership with SMART, Fernandez points out, is also a good bargain for local communities. While Nankin Transit Commission doesn't capture the full millage contributed by the four municipalities, Fernandez is quick to remind any skeptic of the returned value beyond dollars.

Nankin Transit schedules all vehicle maintenance through SMART's facilities and purchases fuel from their regional partner.

"We were spending \$6-7,000 a year for tires alone," laments Fernandez. "SMART has the experience, the tools

Nankin Transit's Fernandez and SMART Ombudsperson Gloria Crockett-Bradley emphasize their symbiotic partnership.



and the expertise to put our coaches in better shape at a considerable reduction in cost. For me to run a system with maintenance would involve horrendous expense. Instead, it's available to use just a few miles down the road."

When Nankin Transit needed to replace vehicles in 1995, Fernandez sought a solution to Michigan's cruel winters and difficult morning starts. Partnering with SMART, a deal was made to purchase the previous year's model from the manufacturer. The savings per vehicle paid for timed heaters to be installed. No longer would Nankin drivers have to arrive early to start the buses. Besides a savings with fewer hours clocked, the reduced warm-up period produced a drastic savings in fuel. Another good deal.

"There's no way we could afford to purchase buses on our own," emphasizes Fernandez.

Naomi appreciates a warm bus. She discovered Nankin Transit through a conversation with her neighbor. When she herself needed transportation to chemotherapy treatments, she began riding the bus.

"I was knocked off my feet when I heard about the service," says Naomi. "'They come to your house?!' It's been wonderful."

Deborah is trying Nankin Transit for the first time. Friends and family, she said, couldn't always provide a ride when she needed one. With necessary medical treatments, she needed reliable connections.

"It's a blessing, really," she says. "I was having different people take me, but sometimes I'd miss appointments."

Betty is on the bus, too, having just finished her regular workout at the community center gym. She started using Nankin Transit after an injury that required follow-up physical therapy appointments. The medical clinic providing therapy guided her to Nankin's service. Now Betty takes the bus to run errands and grocery shop. Sometimes at Farmer Jack's, where Wayne works. Enveloped in his walkman music, he boards and departs with little exchange except for the dollar he gives his driver. With his shift over, he's headed home on the same bus.

"When the Community Partnership Program started we said, 'Right. They're going to do our job?'" says Gloria Crockett-Bradley, SMART's Wayne County Ombudsperson, remembering a few reactions when the idea of millage credits was first floated. "But it works. Residents love it. It's very personal."

Keeping it personal is the partnership aim.

"It's being people-focused, having one-on-one face time" explains Ristau. "It becomes a very human thing."

## Ahead of the Curve

Becky Rose knows the City of Warren well. This is where she grew up. The Warren Parks & Recreation



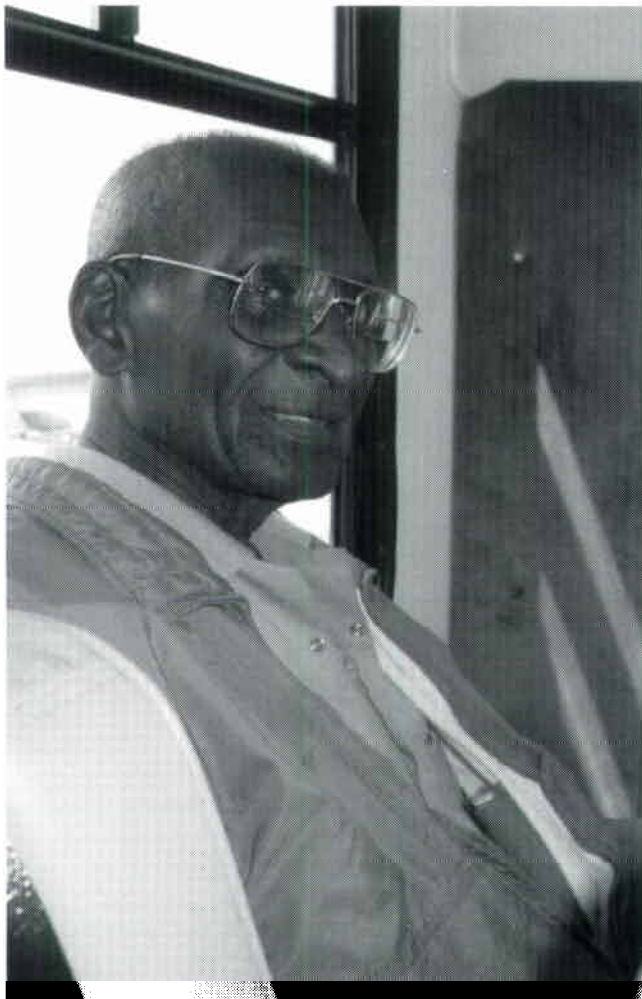
Though their business cards are stamped with other professional titles, Dirks (top) and Ristau consider themselves "mobility managers."

Department Rose now supervises is housed in the old auto shop garage of her high school alma mater. Cars and classrooms have been replaced with buses and community. Senior Citizen Specialist Rose spends her day making connections.

Since its incorporation 50 years ago, Macomb County's City of Warren has grown to become Michigan's third largest city. With over 138,000 people, it has undergone a significant demographic change. Families have grown up. Warren is now fifth in the nation in senior population. A community aging in place.

Responding accordingly, elected officials in Warren have targeted resources to meet the needs of this segment of the population. While the City of Warren and





(Clockwise from upper left) Dominick, Mr. Calhoun, Marie and Mr. Ford know the value of a reliable connection.

nearby Centerline are served by several SMART fixed-route lines, the community seniors needed a different kind of mobility. A decade and a half ago, the Parks & Recreation Department expanded beyond organized activities to provide transportation service to senior citizens and disabled persons in their community. In addition to rides to recreation programs, passengers are connected to medical appointments, salon visits and shopping.

"Before, we only had a couple of vans and coaches. We were very limited. We couldn't do home pick-ups," says Rose of the system's pre-millage service. "With SMART, we were able to use community credits, with essentially no out-of-pocket costs, to obtain four new vehicles. That was huge for us. We could do four times as much."

During Rose's first year with the Department six years ago, the program gained four 19-passenger vehicles through SMART's Vehicle Procurement Matching Program — referred to by most as the 80/20 Program. Millage participants provide a 20 percent match to the 80 percent in federal funds that come through SMART. While the local community operates the vehicle, SMART actually purchases and holds the title.

"If SMART was not here, we would not be here," says Rose. "The 38,000 people we transport could not get where they need to go."

The service runs today combining state specialized services funds, state municipal credits, a Parks & Rec millage and SMART's community credits. The department's small staff and nine drivers have trained at SMART's facility, and Rose says she often phones SMART's



maintenance crew for advice.

"If I'm not satisfied or I question something with our local service, I'll call Elbert and say, 'What do you think?'" she says, referring to SMART's maintenance coordinator of the Community Partnership Program.

SMART's Coordination Council gatherings, says Rose, offer an opportunity for neighboring communities to compare what is happening in different situations, to share ideas, to advise peers and to plan co-training opportunities. Most importantly, the exchange helps expand mobility.

"I can approach that individual from Roseville Transit, and we can bridge city boundaries to bring a passenger to our stroke club," explains Rose.

Warren currently shares one of their drivers with the City of Fraiser. After learning of seniors in the neighboring community that want to come to Warren's community center for bingo, Rose is exploring the possibility of a new connection.

"That's what it's all about," says Rose. "I understand you've got some residents that want to come here for bingo. Let's make this work."

Rose's coworker interrupts to ask where score sheets need to be sent. Rose shifts easily from paratransit to pinocle and back again. Recreation requires connections.

"The need is constantly growing," she says of the senior population. "It's a big need and it's not ending."

"Dominick is ready at the Center to go home," says Denise Owens into her phone.

As Senior Citizen Program Technician, she and her colleagues ensure that their community's seniors not only have activities to attend but a way to get there. The City of Royal Oak Senior/Community Center runs six vehicles five days a week using 10 drivers and two dispatchers. While one vehicle serves the Senior/Community Center, the other three are out making connections to doctors' appointments and grocery stores in Royal Oak.

Driver Doris Perrin is dropping off the last of her "lunch bunch." Dominick, now 94, forfeited his driver's license after a serious car accident last year. While he regularly takes the Royal Oak bus to the senior center five days a week — where he finds a good meal, good conversation and an occasional game of pool — he admits he still pines for a license to drive.

"A lot of these people just live for this center," says Perrin. Then, eying her passenger in the rearview mirror, she adds, "And Dominick enjoys the ride."

"Sure. I'm usually the only man on the bus. Just me and my harem," he says with a laugh.

"Some of my passengers have no family," says Perrin. "Some of the women never drove in their lives. Their husbands always drove. Now, their husbands are gone and they can't get anywhere on their own."

The center is now able to get them many places thanks to its partnership with SMART, says Kathleen

Heikkila, coordinator, Senior Citizen Activities. From one donated van providing rides to seniors in 1985, the community transit system has grown to six accessible vehicles providing connections for seniors and disabled residents.

"With the millage and Community Credit Program, we were able to expand our program immensely," says Heikkila, describing increased funding for operations, vehicles and drivers. "The lifts have really opened up our ability to serve the disabled and not just passengers in wheelchairs but those with difficulty walking. We've opened up transportation to a lot of new folks."

Indeed. Last year's ridership increased by 800 rides over 2001, reaching 17,405. [Kathleen is looking up previous stats]. [Not sure we need.]

Heikkila says the center makes good use of their partnership with SMART, working with Oakland County Ombudsperson Donna Sykes to administer funds and new vehicle purchases, sending drivers through SMART's pre-inspection training, calling their maintenance staff with questions or simply sending a bus through their wash bay.

"SMART keeps us running, and that allows us to help keep folks in their own homes, which is what we all want," emphasizes Heikkila.

The cities of Warren and Royal Oak understand well their demographics and mobility needs, and have crafted transportation systems to respond. SMART focuses its resources to ensure they can.

"It's a lot of common sense," says Dirks. "We are so far ahead of the curve as the population ages. Traditional transit can't support the same needs."

### **A Fresh Approach to Metropolitan Transit**

Local community support for mobility, and the partnerships it has fueled, has changed transit's role in southeast Michigan. With that support, says Dirks, comes prestige.

"That's the biggest difference for us since the early 1990s," he says, "We have lots of community exposure because of the millage."

Successfully winning the millage and twice its renewal (with an 82 percent increase in 2002) is both evidence of the Community Partnership Program's successful connections, and a directive for unfinished mobility business. Residents will continue to invest in SMART as long as their return is a dynamic, flexible mobility network.

"For SMART's survival, we have to be open," says Ristau. "There are unmet needs. We can fill them through a cooperative program, or a community can go off on their own. Parochial needs are on everyone's mind when they go to vote. SMART depends on these communities for our life. We work for them."

As choice and mobility expand across the three

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counties, SMART hopes to bring more communities into the program, opening more opportunities for coordination.

"Over time, our credibility has grown, whether it's getting vehicles, getting computers, getting money," says Ristau. "It's people seeing the success and buying in."

Dirks wonders aloud if perhaps faith has been behind SMART's successful transit network, the simple belief that it will all work out.

"I sometimes wonder, because it couldn't have turned out better if we had planned it."

Ristau attributes the network's stability and reach to lack of ego, not caring who gets credit. SMART, like mobility needs, is not confined by boundaries, explains Ristau.

"We're not looking at whose responsibility it is."

"When you're oriented to solving a problem, you don't get hung up on who was supposed to do what," adds Dirks.

Every community is unique; no set of mobility needs the same. Eschewing cookie-cutter models, the SMART network runs on local smarts. Every community brings its ideas to the table.

"Let SMART manage the transit aspect. Let communities manage the day-to-day," says Dirks, explaining the protocol for partnership. "We know how to design it. But we don't know what they need."

Moving forward by a simple philosophy.

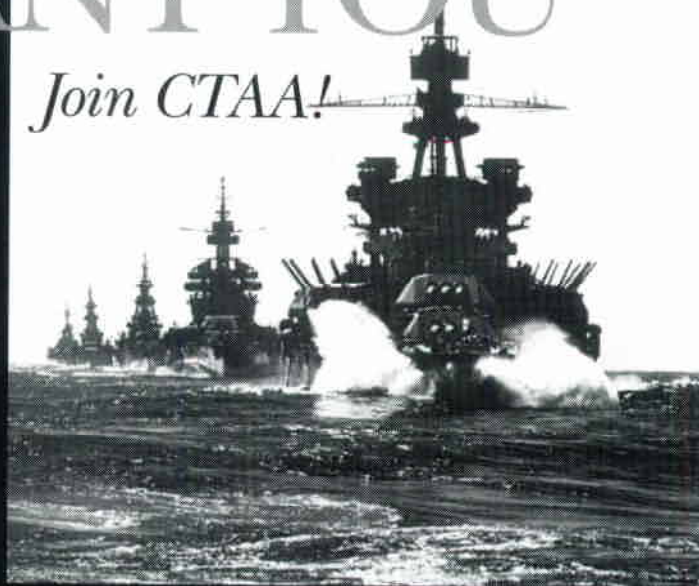
"Ask us," says Dirks. "We try to never say, 'No.' We'll try anything." 🚗

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The Community Transportation Association of America is fighting for your transit service and your riders. here's what our reauthorization plan calls for:

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- Formula investment increases
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- Diversified revenue sources for the transit program

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